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ABSTRACT

This digest examines the positive effects on emotional well-being of several types of outdoor education programs. Although many outdoor education and experiential programs enhance emotional growth, such "therapeutic" outcomes may be considered incidental to program goals. In contrast, programs aimed primarily at "therapy" usually involve a process of assessment, treatment planning, counseling, and documentation of change. Adventure therapy programs often take place in the wilderness and usually are geared toward troubled youth with mental health problems. Adventure may be the sole treatment modality or an adjunct to more traditional therapy approaches. Outdoor personal growth programs are not designed as therapy but are intended to have a positive impact on general psychological well-being. College orientation programs and other college adventure programs have therapeutic effects in that they facilitate the emotional and social development of students experiencing a challenging and stressful period in life. Outdoor recreation programs do not attempt to facilitate emotional growth, but skill development and moral and social development may be secondary outcomes. Camping programs have a long history of facilitating the emotional well-being of campers. As with recreation programs, even camps that are not therapeutic in intent often work to facilitate personal growth in participants. (Contains 22 references.) (SV)

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Therapeutic Uses of Outdoor Education

Dene S. Berman and Jennifer Davis-Berman

ERIC DIGEST

Recent research has documented the positive effects on emotional well-being of many outdoor education programs. This Digest highlights emotional well-being that is intentionally or incidentally achieved in several program types: adventure therapy, personal growth, college adventure, recreation, and camping.

Outdoor education and experiential learning defined. Following the philosophy of Dewey (1938), outdoor education involves cooperative, democratic learning environments that stress an interactive process among students and teachers and experiential learning. Experiential learning is most simply defined as learning by doing (Boss, 1999). Chickering (1976, p. 63) explained that experiential learning "occurs when changes in judgments, feelings, knowledge or skills result for a particular person from living through an event or events." The Association for Experiential Education (1994, p. 1) defines experiential education as "a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill and value from direct experience."

While we most often think about outdoor education as a way to develop leadership abilities, environmental knowledge, and other useful knowledge and skills, it can also be used to develop emotional strength and well-being as evidenced in studies described below.

Intentional versus incidental growth. Although many outdoor education and experiential learning programs enhance emotional growth, they might not do so as their primary intent. Programs that are intended first and foremost as therapy enhance emotional growth in a purposeful, planned manner (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1994). Other programs, like those found in recreation or in college orientation programs, do not have emotional growth as the primary goal, but such growth may be a regularly occurring consequence of participation. In this case, growth may be considered incidental to the program goals.

Another way of making this distinction is to differentiate between the terms *therapeutic* and *therapy*. The first term, an adjective, indicates factors that may be conducive to emotional well-being and may apply to a variety of activities and programs. The latter term, a noun, involves a process of assessment, treatment planning, the strategic use of counseling techniques (including group dynamics, which are often a component of outdoor education programs), and the documentation of change.

Types of Programs

Many programs could be examined related to a discussion of emotional growth, including more than 2,000 camps that are members of the American Camping Association, and more than 700 wilderness experience programs identified by Friese, Hendee, and Kinziger (1998). Wilderness experience programs include programs designed for therapy, rehabilitation, education, leadership, growth, or organizational development. Interested readers are referred to a compilation of 187 research study abstracts on impact of a variety of wilderness programs (Friese, Pittman, & Hendee, 1995). In this Digest, we will highlight therapeutic aspects of outdoor education found in adventure therapy, personal growth programs, college orientation, recreation, and camping programs.

Adventure therapy programs. Programs that use the outdoors as a part of therapy often take place in wilderness settings and involve adventure. Most of these programs are geared toward troubled youth (Berman & Davis-Berman, 1995), who often have been diagnosed with mental health problems. Adventure therapy programs take many forms and may take place in a variety of settings. Program variations include games and initiatives, ropes courses, family therapy programs, adjunctive therapy, and wilderness therapy (Davis-Berman & Berman, 2000). Sometimes the adventure therapy program is the sole treatment modality, while other times it is used as an adjunct to more traditional therapy approaches (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1994).

Russell and Hendee (1999) describe two basic types of wilderness therapy programs:

1. Contained programs last up to three weeks and operate as expeditions, with clients and staff remaining together for the duration of the program.
2. Continuous flow programs last up to eight weeks, with clients and staff cycling in and out of the program.

Cason & Gillis (1994) conducted a meta-analysis of 43 programs that provided evidence of adventure therapy effectiveness. They concluded that participants became more internal in their locus of control, received better grades, and had more positive self-concepts after completion of adventure therapy programs.

Personal growth programs. While these programs are not designed as therapy, they are intended to have a positive impact on general psychological well-being. Participants are less likely to have been diagnosed with a mental health problem or to be receiving treatment than participants in therapy programs. An example of a personal growth program is Outward Bound. Perusal of the Outward Bound Web site reveals the emphasis on personal development as one of their core values:

> ...to perform tasks that are beyond perceived physical, mental and emotional limits enhances students' beliefs in their own capabilities. . . . developing capacities of mind, body and spirit to better understand one's responsibilities to self, others and community. Key areas of development are:
>
> Self-knowledge
> Tenacity
> Teamwork
> The ability to go beyond self-imposed limitations
> Acceptance of responsibility
> Self-reliance
> Craftsmanship
> Physical fitness
> Leadership (Outward Bound®USA, n.d.)

Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards (1997) conducted a meta-analysis of adventure programs, an undertaking they found to be complex and multifaceted. They found that, in general, adventure programs positively impacted self-esteem, leadership, academics, personality, and interpersonal relations, with self-esteem change being most significant. These changes were shown to be more stable over time than the changes generated in more traditional educational programs.

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College adventure programs. The use of adventure to orient new students, introduced at Dartmouth in 1935, continues today in colleges and universities across the country. Orientation and other college adventure programs facilitate the emotional and social development of students, who are experiencing a challenging and stressful period in life. While these programs do not fall into the category of therapy, they do seem to be therapeutic for the young adults enrolled.

Davis-Berman and Berman (1996) studied 50 wilderness orientation programs describing their purposes, structures, goals, and other aspects of the programs. More recently, Gass (1999) reviewed adventure orientation and other wilderness programs to facilitate ongoing adjustment to college, training for resident assistants, and pre-college programs. These researchers found that, of the college offerings, orientation programs have received the most attention. Although the programs vary greatly in design and type, they do tend to focus on peer relationships, socialization, emotional adjustment to college, and college retention (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996; Gass, 1999). Orientation programs have been shown to increase retention, and to positively impact interpersonal skills and relationships (Gass, 1987). However, it is not clear if the retention differences remain over time (Gass, 1990).

Recreation programs. These programs do not attempt to facilitate emotional growth. Instead, they gear up, activate, energize, and excite participants (Priest, 1999). Weiß's (1999) review of recreation programs suggests that their roots tend to be in college-based programs. Some of these programs are connected to degree programs but most are extracurricular.

In general, the goals of recreation programs are fun, enjoyment, and recreation. However, program organizers identify skill development and moral growth as secondary goals. Through the vehicle of recreation, different types of skill development can occur. For example, participants can learn to become more socially comfortable. They may also learn to be less inhibited and become more open to trying new things and taking some risks. In recreation programs, participants may also be exposed to different types of people, different ways of responding, and alternative ways of thinking. Sometimes through these experiences, moral and character development can also occur (Weiß, 1999).

Due to the nature of the goals of recreation programs, outcome studies are generally not done. Descriptions of recreation programs throughout North America can be found in a recent publication compiled from a survey of college- and university-based programs (Weiß, 1996).

Camping programs. The organization of camps for the expressed purpose of facilitating the emotional well-being of campers dates back to the early 1900s with Camp Ahmek in Algonquin Park, Ontario (Dimock & Hendry, 1939). Improving social behavior was a stated goal of this early camp, and extensive records of participant progress were kept in an attempt to document personal growth. Camps continue to be a popular outdoor experience, especially for youth. As with the recreation programs, even camps that are not therapeutic in their intent often work to facilitate personal growth in the participants.

Marsh (1999) conducted a meta-analysis on the influence of camp experiences on self-concept in youth. He found a positive influence on self-esteem in those programs that had a focus on self-enhancement. This increase in self-esteem was most pronounced for pre-teens, but was positive across all ages.

Conclusions

Despite the wide variety of outdoor education programs, a unifying thread seems to be the facilitation of emotional growth and well-being. Certain program types, like therapy programs, intentionally build emotional growth into their program structure. For others, like recreation programs, this growth is incidental to the original program goals.

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Web Sites of Interest

Outward Bound: http://www.outwardbound.com

American Camping Association: http://www.acacamps.org/

Dene S. Berman (dene.berman@wright.edu) is a psychologist with Lifespan Counseling Associates, Dayton, Ohio; and clinical professor of professional psychology and associate clinical professor of medicine, Wright State University.

Jennifer Davis-Berman (berman@udayton.edu) is associate professor in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Social Work at the University of Dayton; and associate clinical professor of medicine, Wright State University.

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